

News Release



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Fledgling rates on the rise

Observations at Oceano Dunes Show Significant Progress for Snowy Plover

OCEANO DUNES, San Luis Obispo County – Scientists with California State Parks say initial observations of nesting western snowy plovers show significant progress in chick survival following the department's efforts at predator management at this popular off-road park.

The federal government has listed the western snowy plover as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. California State Parks has initiated extensive protective efforts for the shorebirds at Oceano Dunes, as well as elsewhere along the California coast where the birds nest. About 25 percent of California's 1,100-mile coastline is under the jurisdiction of California State Parks.

With the 2002 breeding season about half over at Oceano Dunes, surveys already show that of the 50 western snowy plover chicks that have hatched so far this season, 20 have reached fledgling age, meaning the age at which they are capable of flying. It is premature to predict the final fledgling percentage at this time, as many of the remaining chicks have yet to fledge and others are due to hatch in the coming weeks. The nesting season has about 10 weeks remaining.

However, this year's fledging rate already has far surpassed last year's, when just two western snowy plover chicks survived out of 71 hatched. That was before State Parks instituted its predator management efforts.

"Avian predators hit us hard last year, specifically the loggerhead shrike," said Laura Gardner, District Resource Ecologist for Oceano Dunes. The loggerhead shrike is a songbird that hunts like a small hawk. Its nickname is "butcherbird" because it sometimes hangs its prey on thorns of plants.

"With the implementation of a predator management plan in 2002, which includes relocation of the resident shrikes, the outcome looks promising," she said.

(more)

Oceano Dunes also is home to nesting populations of California least terns, an endangered species. Of the 22 California least tern nests established so far this season, 25 chicks have hatched. Fledge rate is undetermined at this time.

“Our monitoring of the snowy plover and least tern will continue seven days a week, at least eight hours a day,” Garnder said.

Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area is located on the central coast of California in San Luis Obispo County near Pismo Beach, and hosts more than 1 million visitors annually. Oceano Dunes currently earmarks about a third of its annual budget for the protection of wildlife and related habitats.

Additionally, fines for illegal camping access at Ocean Dunes recently were elevated from \$64 to \$270 in order to maintain compliance with California Coastal Commission requirements to impose a limit on attendance during the summer months and help reduce conflicts between riders and nesting birds.

Last month the California Department of Parks and Recreation announced a number of new policies and restrictions on other state beaches as part of its expanding effort to protect the western snowy plover.

The western snowy plover is a sparrow-sized, pale-colored shorebird that breeds along the Pacific Coast from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. The coastal population of the bird is listed by the federal government as threatened due to a serious decline in breeding numbers, mainly as a result of loss of suitable habitat and disturbance by people.

Snowy plovers nest on open, sandy beaches along much of the coastline from early spring to mid-fall. State Beaches provide essential nesting habitat for plovers, and at a time of the year that typically coincides with highest visitor use. Because of this, proper stewardship and protection of nesting areas on State Beaches by California State Parks is vital to the recovery of the species.

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